

University challenge

The Browne review of higher education funding and student finance has been welcomed as ‘fair and progressive’ by some and condemned as ‘elitist’ and ‘socially disastrous’ by others. Some of the leading commentators and stakeholders from across the sector weigh up the implications

A landmark in the history of financial support for part-time students, but how many will be prepared to make the investment demanded?
asks **Claire Callender**

One of the few pieces of good news to emerge from the report of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance – headed up by Lord Browne of Madingley – was that student loans for tuition fees are to be extended to part-time undergraduate students. Browne’s recommendation was accepted by the government in universities minister David Willett’s statement to the House of Commons on 3 November. The change is a landmark in the history of financial support for part-time students.

Principle 06 of Browne’s report states: ‘Part time students should be treated the same as full time students for the costs of learning.’ The report continues: ‘The current system requires part time students to pay upfront. This puts people off from studying part time and it stops innovation in courses that combine work and study. In our proposal the upfront costs for part time students will be eliminated, so that a wider range of people can access higher education in a way that is convenient for them’ (page 5). It is also clear from the report that the rationale for the inclusion of part-time students within the reformed system of student financial support are the economic imperatives of driving economic growth, up-skilling and re-skilling the current workforce, and meeting the needs of the economy and of employers. There is not one reference in the Browne report to lifelong learning.

In fact, part-time students will not be treated ‘the same as full time students’ because student loans for tuition fees will be limited to part-time students studying a third of a full-time course. This third amounts to 40 credits, and anyone working in HE knows that

modularised courses are usually in multiples of 15 credits. Consequently, HEIs will have to find ingenious ways of getting around this restriction so students can benefit from the new loans.

Far more part-time students will be eligible for tuition fee loans than the 10 per cent of part-timers (approximately 52,900 students) now receiving fee grants (Hansard, 2010). Unlike the current fee grants, the tuition fee loans will cover a student’s tuition fees in full. A student’s household income no longer will affect their eligibility to government-funded financial support, though an existing Level 4 qualification on entry probably will. But these loans will have to be repaid, unlike the current fee grant which the loan replaces, and students will lose the grant (up to £260) they receive at present toward their other course costs.

It is unclear exactly how many part-time students will qualify for the new tuition fee loans. It could be anything between a third and a half of all part-time undergraduates. As significant, is the question of just how many of those who qualify for the loans will actually take one out. The average age at which a part-time undergraduate completes their qualification and graduates is about 40. Most of them earn above £21,000 – and will incur the higher interest rates on their student loan repayments. How willing will they be to take on additional financial commitments and debts, at a time in their life when they have substantial demands on their financial resources? Will they be prepared to take out loans that they will have to repay for the rest of their working lives? In addition, the private financial returns for adults undertaking part-time undergraduate qualifications tend to be

lower than those enjoyed by younger full-time HE graduates because they have shorter working lives in which to recoup the benefits. So will adult part-time students be willing to make the investment demanded by loans for tuition fees – based upon some imagined future?

The answers to these questions in part depend on the level of tuition fees charged. The withdrawal of government funding received by universities for the teaching of arts, humanities, and social science subjects, the probable withdrawal of the part-time premium (the extra money higher education institutions [HEIs] receive to cover the additional costs of teaching part-time students), along with HEIs’ new freedom to charge tuition fees of up to £9,000, mean that part-time tuition fees will have to rise substantially. In addition, part-time fees will need to rise at a faster rate than most full-time undergraduate fees because currently only a minority of HEIs charge a pro-rata rate of the maximum full-time tuition fee. These changes potentially open up a range of new opportunities for part-time study and part-time students. In turn, they raise another vexing issue – what impact will higher tuition fees have on the demand for part-time study, especially among those who do not qualify for the loans or do not want to take them out, but all of whom will face much higher fees? Higher education will be free at the point of access for some part-time undergraduate students but certainly not for all part-time undergraduates.

Claire Callender is Professor of Higher Education, Birkbeck and the Institute of Education, University of London

Colleges with a commitment to high-quality, value-for-money and inclusive HE can approach this new world with confidence, writes **John Widdowson**

The Browne review presents many challenges for all those involved in the delivery of higher education. Key elements of our system are facing fundamental change as higher education assesses the impact of a world in which the state stands back and students or their employers have a direct financial interest in what is provided and how it is delivered. Much of what we have all taken for granted for many years faces radical change. Opinion is divided between those who fear the consequences for both institutions and students of increased fees and the impact on participation, and those who welcome increased funding for hard-pressed universities, whatever the source.

From the FE college perspective, many of the fears about the impact on widening participation are shared. However, in a changed world, there are also opportunities to build on what colleges do well and to continue to serve those who traditionally have found participation in HE more difficult. To begin with, colleges may use their lower cost base and focus on teaching to provide

courses which are both affordable and tailored to student needs and expectations. Building on their wide range of vocational expertise developed over years of delivering a skills-focused FE curriculum, colleges are well placed to meet the needs of employers and students for quality higher-level skills qualifications.

FE colleges can approach this more dynamic and less predictable world with confidence. They have demonstrated that they can provide quality at an affordable price, with a focus on teaching and learning. Colleges offer an alternative experience to more traditional concepts of what HE should be and what it is for. In a world where students or their employers will foot the bill, colleges have learned to be flexible and responsive.

The Browne proposals also address a long-standing issue on the support given to part-time students, who, under the new arrangements, will be able to access the same levels of fee support as those studying full-time. Managed properly, this could herald the end of the artificial divide between

different modes of study and encourage more open, flexible provision, suited to the needs of adults as they combine work and family responsibilities with study. The new arrangements will safeguard those from poorer backgrounds and those subsequently employed in lower-paid occupations. The new world of HE may see the end of the perception that HE is something done full-time at 18. If the rhetoric surrounding Browne proves true, we may see a more open and accessible system which listens to the needs and expectations of students and offers the sort of provision they want, at a time and place best suited to them and fitting into their career and lifestyle choices.

Although uncertainty may continue for some time, colleges which maintain their commitment to high-quality HE but also offer value for money, learner focus and inclusion will succeed.

John Widdowson is Principal of New College Durham and Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges which offer HE courses

Substituting state subsidy with tuition fees is unjust and impractical as a longer-term solution, argues **Andy Westwood**

Lord Browne's review is based fundamentally on the principle that informed student choices should shape the future of higher education. But his vision depends critically on a one-dimensional view of students and their geographical mobility. Despite all the talk of widening participation, Browne's recommendations are based on the decisions of school leavers moving away from home to university. However, many students already have homes, jobs and families and cannot easily be uprooted. For part-time students and employers local provision is vital. Nearly 50 per cent of all students in higher education are 21 or over, 58 per cent of part-time undergraduates are 30 or over and, overall, one third of students are part-time.

So we welcome many of the progressive proposals contained in Lord Browne's review, including more support for part-time students and higher repayment thresholds for loans. But we simply cannot know the impact of the proposals on participation levels among poorer students or whether they are fairer than the current system. In a few years we may be back where we started – needing to review the impact on widening access and on the world-standing of our higher education.

Browne's view, and the position in the CSR, is that graduates capture most of the benefits from higher education and they

should therefore pay most of the costs. This is perhaps our most fundamental disagreement with Browne. We believe that there are three clear beneficiaries from higher education – the graduate, the economy and wider society. A principle of co-payment seems then to be a much fairer proposition. Substituting state subsidy with tuition fees funded eventually by graduates, though better affordable in the next few years, seems unjust and impractical as a longer-term solution.

Lord Browne and ministers also seem to agree that there is poor quality in higher education and that greater student choice will help to drive up standards. At GuildHE we start from the underlying assumption that quality is much less of a problem than they and others believe. Today some 82 per cent of graduates are satisfied with their courses. More students and more, increasingly diverse, institutions offering higher education, has not meant that the experience has been of a lower quality. Indeed, mass participation and increasing diversity – both essential to the UK's economic position – has come at a comparatively low price. More has not meant worse.

Nor do we believe that Browne will catalyse a market with a range of tuition fees (and price competition) for different courses and institutions. With a hard or soft cap on universities wanting to charge above

£6,000, together with the pressure on other institutions to maintain steady funding with reduced teaching budgets, we may find that the majority will end up charging very similar fees. In turn this too may further constrain the choices and participation of many students.

Reduced numbers and resources would dangerously weaken the sector's ability to drive economic growth in coming years. This is part of the policy prescription that should not be left to chance. Yes, higher education should play its part in reducing the deficit and, like any sector, it has a responsibility to innovate and improve its offer. But it must play its fundamental part in spearheading the recovery. Economic growth is not just an abstract national concept, but is also highly relevant in towns, cities and regions throughout the country. GuildHE institutions, whether in High Wycombe, Carlisle, Plymouth or Birmingham, are experts at generating human capital, supporting local businesses and improving public services in their areas – the value and impact of a local university is immense. So too is the contribution of specialist institutions to the creative arts, teaching and education, health services and to land-based and environmental industries. All are much too important to be left to chance in a world built on the choices of a minority.

Andy Westwood is Chief Executive of GuildHE



Lord Browne's recommendations are short-sighted, unsustainable and unfair, says **Aaron Porter**

At the very least, you have to say that Lord Browne didn't shy from delivering the report that he wanted to give – despite being fully aware of the huge public uproar that would ensue.

It was widely expected that the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, led by Lord Browne, would recommend a substantial hike in the tuition fee cap. But not many can have expected Lord Browne to go the whole hog and include provision for the development of a full open market in tuition fees – whereby some 'elite' institutions would be able to charge Ivy League-style fees – since restricted to an upper limit of £9,000 by the government.

Neither can many have expected Browne to, in effect, advocate the near-complete privatisation of the sector – with teaching funding cut by a staggering 80 per cent. In such a privatised university sector, the state would act essentially as a conduit for student finance, while supporting a few so-called 'priority subjects'. This is an ideologically-driven shift in how higher education is viewed and provided – and all those who recognise the massive societal benefit of a public higher education system must roundly reject this move.

At the same time as shifting the contribution burden massively on to the individual student (via years of debt), Lord Browne again boldly turns his back on the findings of the Dearing

report into higher education, which spoke of the three beneficiaries of higher education as including the individual student, the state and business (Dearing suggested students should contribute 25 per cent of the cost of their education, with business and the state splitting the remaining 75 per cent). Alas, Browne's report has nothing to suggest in terms of any structured mechanism by which businesses could be encouraged to contribute to the costs of higher education, for instance through tax incentives or other employer contribution mechanisms. The financial burden is placed squarely on the shoulders of students.

Denying student loans to those with grades below a specified UCAS tariff level also goes further than many could have imagined, in effect stifling social mobility – given that grades are relatively lower amongst those that come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the higher the 'attainment threshold' the more people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be excluded from much-needed student loans and support.

Furthermore, the report shirks the issue of postgraduate funding, somewhat unconvincingly arguing that there is no problem here. In fact, many of us know there to be major deficiencies, with access too often dependent on an applicant's access to financial support from family or friends.

And no attempt is made to look at the

potential for developing a more flexible approach to higher education study – and many of us who have long argued for increased portability of credits and qualifications will recognise the huge lost opportunity that this represents.

There are some praiseworthy aspects to the report, and these are certainly worth us strongly supporting. The long-standing inequity that surrounded student finance provision for part-time students will be rectified, through the proposed extension of loans to part-time students – and this could have a significant impact in widening access to higher education. And the raising of the threshold for repayments from £15,000 to £21,000 is also a positive step – although it must be noted that this merely corrects the previous failure to index-link the £15,000 threshold.

With Lord Browne sticking so ardently to his own beliefs, attention has turned to the seeming inability of certain Liberal Democrat MPs to do the same. We will be strongly making the case for rejection of the general thrust of the report, and working with all those who recognise the importance of a higher education system that is funded in a way that is both sustainable and fair.

Aaron Porter is President of the National Union of Students

The only way to deliver the higher-education expansion needed to support growth in the knowledge economy is to increase fees, argues **Charles Levy**

In the current fiscal climate the core recommendations of the Browne review offer the only viable option for the future funding of higher education. A government committed to sustaining the recent expansion in output from our universities without sacrificing its quality, must support an increase in tuition fees. Recent research from the Work Foundation highlights just how important this is.

Shaping up for innovation: Are we delivering the right skills for the 2020 knowledge economy? concludes that, despite the dramatic expansion in students graduating each year, the economy does not have an oversupply of graduates. High unemployment is affecting graduates in the short-term but, as the economy recovers, long-term demand will increase as the knowledge economy – that is, one in which competitive advantage and organisational performance rests on investment in knowledge-based assets, such as software, research and development, design, brand equity, and human and organisational capital – develops.

Long-term progress towards the knowledge economy is transforming the world of work. This knowledge-intensive work depends on the use of ‘tacit’ knowledge that resides in people’s minds in the form of expertise or experience, rather than being written down

in manuals, guides, lists and procedures. Productivity in these knowledge-intensive industries increasingly depends on deriving value from intangible assets such as research and development, branding and advertising, along with organisational development. These activities depend on the types of high-level skills gained at university. At its core, a degree reflects an ability to use tacit knowledge to assimilate, interpret and use a range of specialist information.

While knowledge economy activities are delivered by people across the skills spectrum, research tells us that graduates have a special role to play here. As the knowledge economy continues to develop, the demand for graduates to deliver new and expanding areas of work within the economy will continue to expand. More than ever before, our future prosperity will depend on a sustained expansion in the supply and quality of graduates. Meeting this need must be a central priority for the coalition government.

However, delivering more high-quality graduates will be costly. Our research concluded that simply following an efficiency agenda to save money will not enable the much-needed continued expansion of higher education, and cuts in spending could impair the quality of teaching. In this climate of public-sector austerity, the available evidence

confirms that the only remaining viable option for a government that has to deliver higher education expansion is to increase fees.

The major reform to the higher education system announced in the spending review shows that the government has accepted this argument. The reform is to shift the burden of higher education funding away from the taxpayers and to individuals. However, it is the scale of the shift which is of concern. If the government’s intention is just to replace public money with higher contributions from students, the higher education system as a whole will struggle to expand and drive up quality. Increased contributions from both will be essential over the next decade.

Our research demonstrates the risks associated with the recent narrow government focus on the number of places on science, technology, engineering and maths courses – this is not necessarily delivering graduates with the breadth of qualities demanded by employers. If, as Browne recommends, public investment is to increasingly focus on these areas then it is vital that more incentives are used to develop the graduates with the full range of skills needed by the future economy.

Charles Levy is a senior researcher at the Work Foundation.

Browne’s recommendations will stop widening participation in its tracks, writes **Carole Leathwood**

For adults hoping to return to study, there is one piece of potential good news in the Browne review: the recommendation to give part-time students access to student loans. The rest of Browne’s recommendations, however, spell disaster for everyone but the privileged few and they will stop widening participation in its tracks. A lot of media attention is being given to young people who face the prospect of a lifetime of debt, but let us not forget potential mature students who are more likely to have existing financial commitments and dependents and who may fear for the future with so many job cuts on the cards. Taking on more debt may well be unthinkable in these circumstances, especially for those groups, including working-class, women and minority-ethnic students, who are less likely to be able to command high salaries on graduation.

There is already a considerable gap between the participation rates of different socio-economic groups, with those from middle-class backgrounds still more than twice as likely to participate as their working-class peers. Equally stark is the pattern of

participation across different institutions, with richer students clustered in the far wealthier elite university sector and poorer students most likely to attend poorer universities. Research a colleague and I conducted illustrated the impact of this on students, with richer institutions having a far better staff-student ratio and being able to spend significantly more per student on resources such as libraries, computers, student services and careers advice than poorer institutions (see Leathwood and Read’s *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A Feminised Future?* Open University Press, 2009). Browne recommended uncapped variable tuition fees to ensure a market in higher education – an outcome for which the elite universities have been lobbying hard. Although the coalition has resisted this and proposed a cap of £9,000, this is still almost three times the current fee and it seems highly unlikely that those institutions that have most prided themselves on widening participation will be willing or able to set the fee at this level. Richer institutions, in contrast, with comparatively richer students, will be able to charge this amount,

resulting in existing inequalities becoming further entrenched. It also seems likely that government funding for the arts, humanities and social sciences will cease completely, with the risk that fewer universities will offer these subjects and only the privileged will be able to study them.

The present government champions ‘fairness’, but the outcomes of the implementation of the Browne review would be anything but fair. Little will change for wealthier students who will still be able to choose the most prestigious universities, study whatever they like and have little difficulty in entering the higher-paid professions. Poorer students, however, are more likely to be deterred from entering higher education at all, and/or to have very limited options of where and what to study.

And don’t believe the rhetoric about there being no alternative. Other countries are increasing their investment in higher education in response to the recession. We spend a lower proportion of gross domestic product on HE than the OECD average, so there is a strong case for increasing this.

Options include increasing taxation on those that can afford to pay, tackling tax avoidance, and/or increasing corporation tax to the G7 average, as suggested by the University and College Union. In difficult economic

times, higher education is more essential than ever and those of us who have already benefitted from it need to ensure that the door stays open to others – not only to benefit those individuals, but because society as a

whole will be richer for it.

Carole Leathwood is Professor of Education in the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), London Metropolitan University

Mums and dads who want the best for their children will see this for what it is – a stealth tax on learning and aspiration, says **Sally Hunt**

There has been a triple whammy of university funding announcements in the last month. We had the long-anticipated Browne review, the government's comprehensive spending review and the government's response to the Browne review.

The Browne review was supposed to be independent of government yet it conveniently suggested raising the amount students pay for a degree to cover the money the government announced it was cutting from universities' teaching grants in the spending review a week later.

Browne also suggested changing the rates of interest on student loans. It therefore came as little surprise that the government adopted the idea of charging students more and increasing the interest on their repayments. Selling plans to triple fees and raise interest rates on student debt in the House of Commons, David Willetts did his best to try to convince sceptical MPs that the proposals were fair and progressive.

The Liberal Democrats need the fair and progressive line more than most and, more importantly, need to be able to convince people that trebling debt, and raising the charges on that debt, is something other than a betrayal of their principles. At the General Election Liberal Democrat MPs pledged to abolish fees and campaign against any increase. The day after the government announced its proposals, the Liberal Democrats plummeted to just nine per cent in the polls.

The fallout from the government's proposals is far more severe than lost seats for coalition scapegoats. England would be in the unenviable position of having the most expensive public degrees in the world, with families having to shell out thousands of pounds to put their children through university. The proposals could be the final nail in the coffin of a university degree affordable to the vast majority of ordinary families.

Inevitably, participation will fall among some groups. A number of recent surveys have shown that a large proportion of prospective students make decisions on where to study on the basis of cost. Some will find the debt too daunting. Students from lower- and middle-income backgrounds will see their options narrowed, as studying away from home becomes too expensive, and will be limited to a handful of local institutions.

Faced with huge costs, students will be



UCU members protest against higher education cuts

more likely to choose courses based on their perceived economic outcomes. Academic ability or ambition will, by necessity, become irrelevant. Unpopular courses and departments will flounder and some talented students will be forced to abandon their dreams to study whatever courses they can find locally.

Add to this, Browne's assumption that government will withdraw direct funding from all but priority subjects – clinical, health, science, technology, engineering and maths – and you have a real survival-of-the-fittest situation. Many arts and humanities courses will struggle – if student numbers aren't high enough, they will close. How short-sighted this policy is when you consider that the UK has the world's largest and fastest-growing

cultural economy.

The review justifies higher fees by highlighting the 'graduate premium' – the additional earnings a graduate is projected to gain after getting a degree compared to earnings for those without degrees. However, some of the projections are highly optimistic and assume uniformity in the graduate earnings premium, whereas, in fact, graduate earnings differ vastly according to subject studied and career pursued, as well as gender, social background and schooling.

In this newly created market place, private providers will move into the fray knocking out degrees on the cheap, piling student numbers high but offering questionable quality. In essence, I believe this review is a savage attack on what a university is and what it can offer to

all students – not just those with deep pockets – as it effectively privatises the cost of a degree from state to family.

Some universities will become bastions of privilege offering a wide range of academic subjects to students living away from home and enjoying the traditional university experience as a passage into adulthood. Others will churn out debt-ridden graduates in limited vocational fields to local students who lived at home. This two-tier system could be reinforced by employers who may favour the former, reducing the scope for social mobility for those from lower-income backgrounds.

Currently, students start to pay back their loans once they are earning £15,000 but Browne has recommended that threshold rises to £21,000. However, it is worth noting that the average graduate starting salary is £25,000 so starting repayments at £21,000 doesn't suggest much confidence in the graduate premium.

So what is the alternative to higher fees and such punitive spending cuts? UCU believes the credible alternative is to ensure that all

those who benefit from higher education foot the bill. While the costs of university have been met by students and the state, the other main beneficiary of higher education has contributed very little.

UCU believes big business should be taxed for the substantial benefits it gains from a plentiful supply of graduates and has proposed a modest business education tax for the big earners – those who make profits of over £1.5 million a year.

Under our proposal the vast majority of UK businesses would be unaffected. We are not talking about punishing hard-up small businesses. Our business education tax would only apply to the really big players – the likes of Vodafone, Shell and BP. Increasing corporation tax to the G7 average of 32.87 per cent and hypothecating the extra revenue to higher education would generate enough annually to cover tuition fees.

The Browne review was supposed to examine every aspect of student funding and propose radical new ways to fund our universities. By simply suggesting ways for the government to shift the burden to students

to fund degrees it has dramatically failed to meet its remit. A recent poll showed that 70 per cent of students would not have gone to university if they were charged £7,000-a-year fees.

The coalition is introducing a learning tax that will saddle the next generation of professionals with years of lost revenue. The message this sends is that in the UK we now penalise aspiration rather than encourage it. Mums and dads who just want their children to have better opportunities than they did will see this for what it is – a stealth tax on learning and aspiration.

George Osborne started his spending review by saying that he did not wish to burden children with debts the government was not willing to pay. That is just utter nonsense when put against his government's plans for university funding. Future students will be saddled with record levels of debts and it doesn't matter how they are dressed up, they still need to be paid off.

Sally Hunt is General Secretary of the University and College Union

Both Browne and the spending review are premised on the idea that only the individual benefits from higher education, writes Pam Tatlow

There is no doubt that universities and students are big losers in the Browne and spending reviews. As a result of the latter, the funding of higher education will be cut by 40 per cent by 2014. In cash terms this means that the £7.1 billion annual spend will be reduced by £4.2 billion to £3.9 billion in the CSR period. These cuts will largely be directed at undergraduate teaching. Depending on how the forecast 80 per cent cut in teaching funding is divvied up, many universities stand to lose between 95 and 100 per cent of their annual teaching grant. Even the much-vaunted retention of funding for STEM subjects may not be what it seems with only a small proportion of funding being retained compared to the present. A survey of universities undertaken by Million+ has confirmed that universities will have to charge fees of up to £8,000 per annum and, even then, many would end up being worse-off. There is also every prospect that HEFCE will be forced to cut institutional budgets in the current academic year as well as in 2011-12.

Ministers say that funding will be retained in the system but transferred to students. In reality, unless they can pay upfront, from 2012-13 students will have to take out much larger fee loans which they will repay as graduates for longer (30 years instead of 25) and at higher interest rates (three per cent, rather than the 2.2 per cent recommended by Browne, is the figure being spoken about in the Department for Business, Innovation

and Skills). As a result, the funding of undergraduate teaching will be dependent on the willingness of students to take out fee loans that are perhaps double the current £3,290 annual fee.

Under Browne, part-time students will be entitled to fee loans (but not maintenance loans or grants). This step towards a unified system is obviously welcome. However, Browne offers no assessment as to the likely impact on part-time enrolment of the much higher pro-rata fees which will arise as a result of the withdrawal of public funding from teaching.

It is also disappointing that both Lord Browne and coalition ministers have been silent on the impact of higher fees, and the graduate contribution scheme which they advocate, on mature students or on the costs of employer-supported learning and co-funded places. In this respect, both are relying on the out-dated idea of the 'standard' full-time student graduating at 21 or 22 years of age. Taking out fee and maintenance loans of £30,000-plus may look very different for those entering higher education in their 30s and 40s. As yet no equality impact assessment has been published.

Browne also makes some other worrying proposals – for example, a government-set UCAS tariff would determine access to student finance. Universities have already made clear their concerns – not simply in terms of institutional autonomy but in particular because of the risk to widening participation applicants and the accredited prior learning

which many universities take into account in the admission of older students.

Teaching funding is accounted for against the public sector borrowing requirement. By cutting public investment, the coalition will be able to reduce the deficit. The irony is that the government will have to borrow to fund much higher fee loans but only the write-off cost of the latter (the RAB charge) will appear on the Treasury books. As a result, MPs will have to defend much higher fees, students will have to take out much larger fee loans and universities will be worse off.

The Browne and spending reviews end the partnership approach of public investment and graduate contribution. Instead they are premised on the idea that only the individual benefits and that there is no value to society or the economy of higher-level qualifications (and therefore no need to fund them directly). This philosophy has been challenged by Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE, who has argued that the deficit will not last forever and that there will be a case to revisit the principle of public investment in undergraduate teaching. In the meantime, the big risk is that participation will be undermined not from those groups with the greatest financial and cultural capital but from others for whom university is part of a long (and often winding) path of progression.

Pam Tatlow is Chief Executive of the university think-tank Million+



1. The first question is about the importance of gender equality in the workplace. The answer is that it is very important for the success of a company and for the well-being of its employees.

2. The second question is about the role of women in leadership. The answer is that women play a crucial role in leading organizations and driving innovation.

3. The third question is about the challenges women face in the workplace. The answer is that women often face discrimination and unequal pay, which can hinder their career progression.

4. The fourth question is about the benefits of gender diversity. The answer is that diverse teams are more creative and productive, leading to better business outcomes.

5. The fifth question is about the importance of mentorship for women. The answer is that mentorship provides women with valuable guidance and support, helping them overcome obstacles and advance in their careers.

The two-tier system that privileged full-time study above part-time learning is effectively over, writes **Martin Watkinson**

In all the media comment on the Browne review, one significant recommendation has gone largely unreported. It is summed up in a single phrase. When it comes to the costs of learning, the report says, 'part time students should be treated the same as full time students'. It is a breathtaking change, made all the more remarkable by the fact that both government and opposition have moved immediately to welcome it.

For those who have been arguing for a better deal for part-time students over many years, this is an astonishing turn of events and one to welcome. Lord Browne and his colleagues have not only listened to the arguments put forward by NIACE, the Open University, Birkbeck and others, they have had the vision and the courage to act.

This single recommendation effectively marks the end of a two-tier system of higher education – which privileged and incentivised full-time study above part-time learning – and the start of a new, modern era of higher education which promotes opportunity, flexibility and quality.

It ushers in a new system of financial support in which the outmoded distinctions between full-time and part-time students are swept away to be replaced by a single integrated framework of support for learning in which all students studying 40 credits or more (irrespective of mode) are treated equitably and according to their different needs and circumstances.

It proposes the removal of the last vestiges of up-front fees from the higher education (and specifically part-time) sector. The report states: 'There will be no upfront cost for any student, regardless of the mode of study'. If approved, the four in 10 undergraduate students who study part-time will, for the first time, be eligible to defer the costs of their learning over time and repay on similar terms to full-time students.

Moreover, as the report acknowledges, Lord Browne's proposals 'create the potential for government to review the restrictions on access to funding to students who are studying for a second degree'. This could enable many so-called 'ELQ' students who are currently denied access to funded places and student support to engage in professional development or retrain for a new career.

Underpinning all these recommendations is a recognition of the tremendous contribution that a strong and vibrant part-time sector can make to key national priorities – creating choice and flexibility in higher education, raising the skills level of the workforce and helping to widen participation and improve social mobility. As the report makes clear: '[E]conomic growth will rely upon people with high level skills and it is likely to be through



part-time rather than full-time study that people already in the workforce will be able to retrain and prepare themselves for work in new industries.'

So far, so good. But we need to do more. Not only do we need to ensure that these landmark recommendations are sustained and supported through the political process, but we need also to strengthen them still further and make sure that, in their final detail, they are fit for purpose. We need to do four things in particular.

First, we need to reduce the intensity at which students are eligible for financial support. The current threshold is 50 per cent (60 credits) and Lord Browne has recommended that it should be lowered to 33 per cent (40 credits). However, study loads of 25 per cent and modules of 30 credits are common and they are vital building blocks in a credit-based system. For example, the Open University has over 100 30-credit courses at undergraduate level which are studied by 45,000 students in England alone. If Lord Browne's proposals are implemented as they stand, many of these students will be left out.

Second, we need to ensure that higher education remains attractive and affordable to those with poor learning experiences and modest incomes. Vince Cable has said that he plans to exempt 'the poorest students from graduate contributions for some (or all) of their studies'. It is important that such a scheme builds on the success of the current

fee remission scheme for part-time students.

Third, we need to make sure that the Access and Success Fund, which the review recommends, should be equal to, or greater than, current allocations for widening participation and promoting fair access. Institutions must be able to reach out and provide additional support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to improve their chances of success.

Finally, we should interrogate the system of student number controls that Lord Browne recommends. The report suggests that government should offer financial support to all students who meet an annually set UCAS tariff point standard or who satisfy other criteria. These other criteria will need careful definition because it is under these conditions that many non-traditional students will seek entry to higher education.

Of course, there is much else in the report to welcome and to challenge. And there are significant risks that require careful management. Nevertheless, this is a time to be bold. Lord Browne has done us a great service by urging government to level the playing field between part-time and full-time study. He deserves our thanks and support. We must now ensure that ministers and Parliamentarians build on the foundations that he has prepared.

Martin Watkinson is the Open University's Director of Government Relations

This narrow model of higher education, in which subjects with a relatively low cash return are discouraged, is crowding out a more rounded view. Is there really nothing more to life than the bottom line? asks **Charles Seaford**

Lord Browne tells us: ‘The return to graduates for studying will be on average around 400 per cent’. In this world view higher education is an economic investment. If his recommendations are adopted there will be even greater pressure to study only for a high-paying job – and a strong deterrent to potential students who are uncertain that they can command the salaries needed to cope. Indeed, according to this world view, it would actually be *inefficient* for graduates to take lower-paid jobs: the market, as manifest in salary scales, is, according to Browne, the best way of allocating scarce resources. Similarly, since humanities generate a relatively low cash return they should be discouraged, or at the very least receive less public subsidy.

This narrow model of higher education is crowding out a more rounded view – and as a result damaging the wellbeing of the nation as a whole. Is there really nothing more to life than the bottom line? Don’t we need qualified people prepared to take relatively low-paid jobs in the public and voluntary sector? Don’t we value the personal and intellectual development universities provide for its own sake – and want to make it available to as many people as possible rather than just

those aiming to make lots of money?

There are really two questions here which are connected but distinct. The first is what is a university for? And the second is how should we pay for it? Perhaps underlying Browne’s stance is the view that universities, when not delivering vocational skills, are part of the entertainment industry. Some subsidies for skill development are justified (where there is an identifiable market failure) but why should we care too much about the entertainment side: surely this can be left to the market and consumer choice? And perhaps some higher education managers have operated with something like this model at the back of their minds, maximising enrolment at the expense of quality control.

But non-vocational education is not entertainment. Its goal is not to please but to prepare people to lead ‘the good life’. People may disagree about what exactly this is but they tend to agree that it is a good thing and that everyone is entitled to it. Educators need to be clear that, like health care professionals, they make a vital contribution to it. It is true that, as things stand, not everyone will benefit significantly from a university education in this way – and perhaps not every university is capable of delivering this kind of benefit.

But let no-one who has benefited deny the possibility that others less fortunate will one day be able to do so. This is what a university is for – and for as many people as possible.

Of course, having said this, it is reasonable to ask why non-graduates should pay for graduates through the taxation system. But that is not the alternative. The real choice is between a graduate tax on all graduates, past and future, and Browne’s proposals, which lays the burden fairly and squarely on future graduates alone. Just as with the looming pensions crisis, it is the younger generation that is being made to pay for the older generation. That is hardly fair – even before you consider the psychological damage that we know a large debt burden can create.

Like the recently beatified Cardinal Newman 158 years ago, Lord Browne also has an ‘idea of a University’. Newman valued ‘the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us’. Browne values discounted cash flow. Which is better?

Charles Seaford is Head of the Centre for Well-being at the New Economics Foundation

The Browne review moves us further away from a system in which the majority can get the benefits of higher education, says **Danny Dorling**

We have a strange higher education system. Among the other richer countries in the world it is normal for many of the most affluent students to attend a local university. The Browne review’s recommendations will move us even further away from that.

There will be a lot of disappointed mums in years to come. Women who have gone to university themselves will expect their children to go. But Browne moves us away from the trend in the rest of the affluent world in which a large majority go to university. His recommendations have, at their heart, the conviction that in the future we will have no more students than we have at the moment – probably, slightly less. The Chancellor announced an extra 75,000 apprentices on 20 October. I think these are seen as more ‘fitting’ for the young people the Browne review will exclude from university. Akin to when technical schools were introduced between secondary moderns and grammars.

We are moving toward the US model and in the United States there are huge

inequalities on campus. Less well off students are, often, hardly sleeping at all because they have to both work and study for long hours; while students with wealthy parents have an incredibly nice time, and find it easier to do well as they are not exhausted. That’s the best model of what’s likely to happen here.

What I would like to see – and it would have been clever of the Lib Dems to call for this – would be to cap fees at around £3,000 for local students (those growing up within the same county for the largest proportion of their childhood as the university they apply to sits in). It means people can still go to university, it’s very green, you don’t have student ghettos, and people going to university get to know a bit about their neighbourhood. People don’t need to go away from home to learn life skills. Human beings have learned to cook for themselves for millions of years.

I wonder, though, at what point parents will start teaching their children French so they can go and really experience something away from home – and pay less. The Browne review is banking on the fact that we can’t

speak anything but English.

The other thing to look at is which universities will close. The ones that close will be ones where a vast proportion of their students aren’t white and are the first generation of their family to go to university, and the ones least likely to close will be the ones with students that are most likely to be the 30th generation in their family to go to university.

When you are going down a particular route it is also worth asking where next. After a marketised university system the next step is different kinds of sixth forms. I asked a group of students what they thought of fees at sixth form and they didn’t bolt. They have been brought up with this kind of thinking.

Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield

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